

Christopher Osborne

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RHI review must focus on scheme failings – says UFU

The Ulster Farmers' Union says the focus of the review of the Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) scheme must remain on the failings of others to deliver a scheme with adequate safeguards. It says those using the scheme legitimately to reduce energy bills should not be made scapegoats or treated unfairly for the failures of the scheme.

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UFU chief executive, Wesley Aston, says it is advising members who availed of the scheme not to give permission for their names to be disclosed, unless audits have been carried out of their installation. "The department responsible has been slow at getting these audits done. It has no excuses for its failure to act in a timely way. Without the audit farmers risk being criticised, without being able to show they acted within the terms of the scheme. It is up to individuals to decide whether they give permission to be named – but we fear this is not about transparency but efforts to shift the focus from those who failed to safeguard the taxpayer," said Mr Aston

The UFU says the vast majority of people using the scheme are doing so legitimately. It says these people installed boilers to reduce energy costs, and were encouraged to do so by the department responsible for the scheme. It says talk of amending the scheme or changing the rules retrospectively has to be about delivering a fair solution, and not an attempt to sweep embarrassment under the carpet.

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"We are fully behind a proper review of this scheme. How and why what should have been a good scheme went wrong must be fully and properly investigated – but those who used the scheme legitimately must not be tried and convicted in the court of public opinion," said Mr Aston. He added that the UFU's role would be to ensure a fair solution for its members who had invested in a scheme with a long term commitment that it would reduce energy costs. "This is what officials sold to businesses. The focus now must be on finding out how they got it so badly wrong and ignored lessons from elsewhere – not on trying to change the rules to punish those who made legitimate investments in a long term programme backed by government to meet EU targets for renewable energy usage and climate change mitigation," he added.

The UFU, like other bodies, says it has been reviewing its involvement in the negotiations that surrounded the closure of the scheme. It says in July 2015 it highlighted the potential for a spike in applications to officials and proposed the provision of a grace period for those whose applications were in the pipeline, and who had already committed to putting in boilers and associated works. "We have done the same for other renewable energy schemes, including wind turbines, to ensure that

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people facing red tape were not disadvantaged by an arbitrary closure of schemes. This was about fairness and legitimate expectations," said Mr Aston.

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